

**CNA/*The Institute for Statecraft* Meeting on Evaluating
and Countering the Threat from the Islamic State
London, June 11, 2015**

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On June 11, 2015, a group of current and former senior government officials, military officers, and analysts gathered in London to exchange views on topics relating to security in the Middle East.¹ The meeting was jointly convened by CNA's Center for Naval Analyses and the Institute for Statecraft, a British non-profit analytic organization founded in 2003 to study new security threats and to devise and implement responses. The discussion, held under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution, focused on evaluating and countering the threat from the Islamic State (IS).²

Key Points

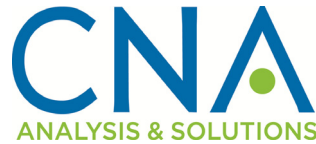
- The Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) is both a religious and a political project. We initially underestimated the power of its appeal.
- IS primarily threatens the Shia and “modern” Sunni regimes in the Middle East and communities worldwide. IS considers them to be apostates who must repent or be eliminated.
- In the West, IS urges would-be *jihadis* to attack members of “crusader” armed forces and/or perceived anti-Islamic targets such as *Charlie Hebdo*.
- Mastery of social media enables IS to exist as a virtual global caliphate.

Islamic State: From Jihadi Movement to Potential Global Caliphate

Western analysts underestimated the Islamic State or, as it was first known, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). President Obama reflected that assessment when, in a January 7, 2014, interview with the *New Yorker* magazine, he lumped ISIS together with other extremist groups, describing them as a “JV team” (junior varsity, usually a university’s secondary sports team). Al Qaeda, to continue the analogy, was the “varsity team,” the main jihadi threat. But only days before the Obama interview, ISIS had burst from its stronghold in Raqqa and the eastern deserts of Syria and seized control of Fallujah in Iraq. By June 10, 2014, ISIS fighters had conquered Mosul, Iraq’s second city, acquiring quantities of U.S.-supplied weaponry, armored personnel carriers, and tanks abandoned by the retreating Iraqi army.

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² The Islamic State is also known as ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) or ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or as Daesh, the Arabic acronym for ISIS. We use its self-declared name, Islamic State, in order to emphasize its global ambitions.



With a swath of the Tigris and Euphrates river valley about the size of Great Britain under their control, the ISIS shura council determined that they held sufficient sovereign territory to create a true Islamic state. On June 29, 2014, the first day of Ramadan, the ISIS spokesman announced the restoration of the caliphate. Henceforth ISIS would be known simply as the Islamic State. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was proclaimed Caliph of all Muslims and would be known as Caliph Ibrahim. Muslims from around the world were called to emigrate to the Islamic State.

Since Ataturk's abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, its restoration has been proposed by various Sunni Islamists. Osama bin Laden considered the measures taken by al-Qaeda preparatory to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime. IS has done what others have not. The IS caliphate has a system of government and a system of justice where sharia law is applied. It collects taxes, sells oil, dispenses relief supplies to the poor, and pays salaries to its combatants and pensions to their widows. It is a state which asserts its duty to govern the religious and political lives of all Sunni Muslims.

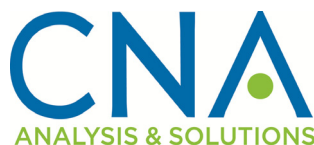
Return of the Iraqi Baathists

The secret of the success of the Islamic State is the fact that its religious identity is undergirded by an army and a civic administration resurrected from the remnants of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated Baathist state. IS fields two types of fighters: young, mostly untrained foreigners eager to participate in jihad and eventually martyr themselves (*mujahirin*); and a very professional military force staffed by local Syrian and Iraqi Sunni fighters (*ansar*) led by former Iraqi officers from Saddam Hussein's army who were trained by the Soviet Union not just in military skills but also in classic terror methods, in propaganda techniques, and in deception. As a conventional military, IS has demonstrated reasonably sophisticated operational capacity. It has the ability to mobilize and focus resources, and to conduct complex attacks and campaigns of violence over time.

In Syria and Iraq, IS presents itself as the Sunnis' last line of defense against a host of enemies: the infidel crusaders in the West, the Alawite dictatorship in Syria, the Shia in Iran, the Shia-led Iraqi government, and the Iraqi Shia militias. In the territory under its control, IS has established itself as a brutal but effective government. It draws support from Sunni insurgent groups such as the Naqshbani, the Mujahedeen army, Ansar al-Islam, and Ansar al-Sunnah. A designated "emir of tribal affairs" works to obtain the acquiescence of the Sunni sheikhs – some of whom, as "Sons of Iraq," earlier supported the American-devised Anbar Awakening. At present, because there is no viable alternative, Sunnis have little incentive to rise up against the Islamic State.

The Islamic State's Apocalyptic Vision: Dabiq and the End of Days

The conflict in Iraq and Syria reflects both religious and national rivalries that are centuries old. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers are part of a movement inspired by Salafism, a strict constructionist, originalist interpretation of the core texts of Islam. Their intention is to reform Islam and return to what they understand to be the practices and beliefs of the time of the Prophet in the seventh century and the four "rightly-guided caliphs" who followed him. Within a generation, Arab armies overran the whole Middle East, North Africa, and Spain. They



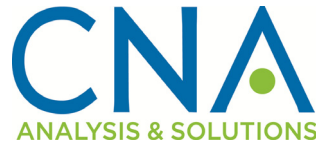
annihilated the Persian Empire. Muslims dominated the world, as promised in the Koran. To achieve that power again and fulfill God's will, al-Baghdadi and the leaders of the Islamic State believe that they must revive the doctrine of violent warfare from the time of the great Arab conquests. Their methods – beheadings, crucifixion, the enslavement of captive non-believers – are designed to instill terror and hasten their victory.

The Islamic State's primary targets are those Muslims they consider to be apostates and thus deserving of extermination – the Shia and all Sunnis whom IS believes have deviated from the true path set out by the Prophet. Christian and Jewish civilians living in the "caliphate" may be tolerated, provided they are subservient and pay the *jizya* tax. But Western militaries, the "crusader" forces, are adversaries to be attacked and provoked into playing out their role in the Koranic prophecy of the End of Days. The Islamic State has attached great importance to the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo. Its Arabic- and English-language propaganda magazine is named *Dabiq*. It is in *Dabiq*, the Prophet reportedly said, that the armies of "Rome" will set up their camp and the armies of Islam will meet them and be victorious, thus launching the series of events which will culminate in the apocalyptic final victory.

Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

Perhaps as many as 20,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent groups. Most are from Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Russia's Chechen Republic. Young European and American Muslims, many of them recent converts, are also joining the fight. In the West, some person-to-person takes place within social or religious circles but the real recruitment draw is IS's remarkably adept use of social media. In addition to *Dabiq*, the on-line magazine, IS produces short and feature-length videos and sermons, which it posts on its "official" social media accounts operated from within Syria and Iraq and relayed by a huge network of supporters and propagandists around the world. The public and instantaneous nature of Twitter has made it a favored communication platform. Between September and December 2014, more than 40,000 Twitter accounts were logged as supporting the Islamic State. The number is probably double now. Recruiters use Twitter or ask.fm to field questions about Islam and about joining the Islamic State. When a Westerner has expressed interest, an interview process follows via encryption software and proxy servers to determine how serious the potential recruit is and to weed out spies.

Once vetted, travel logistics for the new *mujahid* are discussed with the recruiter, while he keeps up a narrative about following God's will, joining the brotherhood of believers, and "finally being among your people." Male Islamic State recruits typically receive a few weeks of religious instruction and combat training on arrival in Syria or Iraq, but some are quickly sent on suicide missions. Recently IS has been making a concerted effort to convince young women to leave their families in the West and travel to the caliphate to fully live their faith and find belonging and purpose in the Islamic utopia portrayed in IS propaganda.



Countering Islamic State Messaging

Western leaders are struggling to reassure and empower their nations' Muslim citizens and broader publics while simultaneously countering the millenarian propaganda of the Islamic State. We condemn the beheadings and atrocities committed by IS; they revel in our revulsion. We condemn the enslavement of captive Yazidi women; they respond that slavery is a historic fact, is accepted by the Muslim faith, and has a place in God's plan. Prime Minister David Cameron and President Barak Obama praise the Active Change Foundation's "Not in my name campaign" in the U.K. The effort dies, having lost credibility among the young Muslims it was intended to reach. When IS urges individuals who wish to be revered by Muslims and rewarded by God to take up the sword to spill the blood of Christians, secularists, and apostates, we as non-Muslims have no standing to judge whether the appeal conforms with Islamic belief. But we must not fail to define the threat with the clarity it deserves.

IS's virtual caliphate is always available somewhere, always being shared by someone, always on-line. Its messaging resonates because it is coherent, is idealistic, and fills a void. It promises, and appears to be delivering, political and military victories for Islam. Countering the marketing appeal of the Islamic State will be a complex, long-term effort. We need to help influential and authentic voices offer a different narrative, another set of ideas. In the U.K. and in the United States, well-informed and supported families, Islamic communities, and frontline personnel represent the best defense. In the region, Sunni Arab governments must recognize that al-Baghdadi's caliphate is an unprecedented threat to their interests, societies, and futures, and must act to systematically undermine its strength and shatter its mystique.

Re-Examining Our Strategic Approach

We need to re-examine our strategic approach to countering the Islamic State. The threat is dynamic and dangerous. IS fighters believe they have divine sanction to cleanse the world and ensure the spread of an uncontaminated Islam; victory is preordained, and death is welcomed as an opportunity for martyrdom. Absent a concerted effort by Muslim states in the region to address legitimate political grievances and stop Sunni-Shia violence, it will be difficult to decisively defeat the Islamic State. It can be contained, its military strength sapped, but unless IS demonstrably fails on its own and in the eyes of the Muslim community worldwide, the risk is that the Islamic State will thrive on-line in a virtual caliphate, endlessly issuing the call to jihad.

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